



Installations by Perry Hoberman: above, *Systems Maintenance*; right, *Timetable*.



Art You Can Touch

Wood Street installations inspire interaction and amusement

Cathartic User Interfaces

Installations by Perry Hoberman
Wood Street Galleries, Downtown
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by Robert Isenberg

There's nothing more fulfilling than an art exhibit you can play with. Artist Perry Hoberman might prefer the verb "interact" over "play," but his whirring, bleeping, high-tech exhibit, *Cathartic User Interfaces*, or *CUI*, is as childlike as a jungle gym. Filling both floors of the generously endowed Wood Street Galleries, *CUI* acts like a theme park for the skeptical computer user.

The two floors are divided into three dimly lit chambers. *Timetable*, Hoberman's first piece, features a round table with a circular screen in the center. By shifting knobs on the side, visitors can manipulate what happens on screen. Computerized cylinders will emerge, jutting out toward the center, like a minimalist video game. Think Nintendo as designed by Phillip Glass. While the sound effects have that Atari appeal, this is only engaging if you coax other visitors into playing with you; moving the knobs in unison, the cylinders react to one another, suggesting an ominous, unexplainable relationship. If you're

alone — as one tends to be in Wood Street — *Timetable* is a fleeting diversion.

On the other hand, the title piece, *Cathartic User Interfaces*, is virtually addictive, no pun intended. Hoberman offers visitors a computer screen, which stands hugely before them like a primitive altar and shows a wallpaper pattern made from linked computer keyboards. Beneath the screen, squishy, multi-colored rubber balls are spread out on the floor. With an approving nod from the gallery attendant, visitors are encouraged to chuck these balls at the screen, whapping the keyboards as hard as their throwing arms will permit. With each plunk, the image changes, showing "error" messages, strands of data floating through the ether of DOS and polite warnings informing you that your computer will now be crashing.

By far the most entertaining of the three installations, *CUI* enacts Dilbert's wildest fantasy: to actually inflict violence on technology. But the act causes no harm; the "screen" is actually a downward video projection on a cloth-covered monolith.

It is rare that gallery patrons may tinker with art, but *CUI* creates a scenario as physical as it is interactive. Hoberman's gimmick is at least amusing, but his use of space is condescending to visitors. You are small and meek; the computer is enormous, a cold deity who speaks cryptically. Funny as it is, *CUI* puts us in a very desperate

position, an awkward irony as ingenious as technology itself. Never mind Hoberman's other work: *CUI* easily stands as the most powerful Pittsburgh installation so far this year.

For that reason, *Systems Maintenance* may disappoint. It's most likely the last stop on your visit and would have to be inhumanly good to beat the title piece. *Systems Maintenance* unites a collection of minimalist furniture and an exact model of the same furniture sitting on a table. Cameras record the furniture — actual-sized and miniature — and project them on one of the walls. Because both sets are projected simultaneously, the images are superimposed, making the tiny blue chair appear the same size as its big blue counterpart. Visitors can move both of them, and watch in amazement as the chairs overlap on the screen. Ideally, you could match up all the furniture, until some jerk came by and shifted everything around.

This is a cute little project, and deceptively complicated, but it hardly compares to *CUI*. It creates a yawning anticlimax, as hollow and boring as you'd expect from a room full of solid-colored furniture. More importantly, *Systems Maintenance* doesn't fit the rest of the exhibit's solid robotic theme. Essentially, you could skip the upper floor entirely and spend that time pitching rubber balls. Now that's catharsis.